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ABSTRACT

There are many institutions that utilize the learning contract as a framework within which learning is described. At Empire State College, the learning contract is a term used to imply a solid commitment to a plan of study developed by a student and a faculty member after whatever deliberation both deem necessary. The learning contract specifies the learning activities to be undertaken, the duration of the study, the criteria by which the work is to be evaluated, and the amount of credit to be assigned. The learning contract addressed itself to various dimensions of learning: the long range plan(s) of the student, specific purposes or topics, the learning activities to be undertaken and the means and criteria of evaluation. The student should clearly state his or her long-range plans, aspirations, or goals. These interests provide a conceptual framework around which a sound degree program is developed. Thus, each contract should relate to the degree program and should be an avenue leading toward the attainment of a degree. This guide presents the framework and the problems inherent in writing a learning contract. (Author/PG)

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A GUIDE TO WRITING LEARNING CONTRACTS

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There are many institutions which utilize the learning contract as a framework within which learning is described. At Empire State College, the learning contract is a term used to imply a solid commitment to a plan of study developed by a student and a faculty member after whatever deliberation both deem necessary. The learning contract specifies the learning activities to be undertaken, the duration of the study, the criteria by which the work is to be evaluated, and the amount of credit to be assigned.

The learning contract addresses itself to various dimensions of learning: the long range plan(s) of the student, specific purpose(s) or topic(s), the learning activities to be undertaken and the means and criteria of evaluation.

The student should clearly state his or her long range plans, aspirations, or goals. These interests provide a conceptual framework around which a sound degree program is developed. Thus, each contract should relate to the degree program and should be an avenue leading toward the attainment of a degree.

There are many conceptual and cultural frameworks which can help students focus their long range plans. They are the vocational/professional mode, the disciplinary/interdisciplinary mode, the problem-oriented mode and the holistic/thematic approach. For example, one student's aspirations might be associated with the expectations or requirements of a vocation or profession. Another student may decide to concentrate in the area of a traditional discipline, while another may want to enter into interdisciplinary studies. One student may want to tackle a social problem, and therefore, would need the knowledge and competence pertinent to various problems and human concerns. Or, there may be a student who is interested in organizing work around a major theme which has its own conceptual complexities and integrity.

The beginning student who is uncertain about future directions or who has had limited academic experiences may wish to explore different areas by ways of short investigatory contracts before deciding on a major area of concentration.

At Empire State College, after the degree program is developed by the student and faculty member, it is approved by a faculty committee. Thus, contracts are cast within the framework of the degree program.

The specific purpose(s) of a learning contract pertain to particular topic(s) or theme(s) to be covered in one contract. These should relate to the degree program. In drawing up a learning contract, there are several alternative learning resources from which students may choose to work such as: independent studies, modules, work internships, formal coursework, residency programs, travel or research.

For example, a student might wish to pursue independent study somewhat in the manner of a correspondence course working through a programmed text and a study guide. The State University of New York has a series of independent studies usually equivalent to a three hour course taken at a traditional institution. There are approximately ninety independent study guides in over thirty areas of study. Many of these are supplemented with films, video tapes, audio cassettes, slides or laboratory kits.

There are also courses offered by industry or by community agencies; others are carried via radio, television and the newspaper covering the areas of the arts and humanities, mathematics or physical sciences, or the social and behavioral sciences. The appropriateness of the independent study should be determined by the student and faculty member prior to its inception.

On the other hand, students may wish to work through modules, short discourses, which are means of encouraging and stimulating students to

to develop their interests or to undertake research in a variety of areas. Usually there are no programmed texts attached to these modules but there are many thought-provoking questions. Empire State College has developed a series of these modules which range from a study of witchcraft in America to a determination of the scientific aspects of music.

A student might wish to serve an internship connected with his or her job; thus, the work may be incorporated into the learning activity. At Empire State College, there was a student who worked as an administrative assistant to a superintendent at a Board of Cooperative Educational Services. As part of her job, she was to help develop a curriculum for teaching personal hygiene to mentally retarded teenagers. The superintendent was her tutor; he suggested a bibliography and worked with her daily. It was clear that although the development of a curriculum was part of her work, it definitely was a learning experience for her.

Other students may have field experiences working as interns in government or social agencies, theaters, museums, radio or television studios, laboratories, libraries, etc. If the work supervisor is to act as the student's tutor, his or her responsibilities should be agreed upon and outlined in the learning contract. The actual learning components of the field work, as well as the evaluative criteria, must, also be specified in the contract.

Another type of learning resource is the tutor. If a student wishes to study in an area for which the faculty member does not have the competence of the time, some arrangement might be made so that a tutor may be hired. For example, a student who is interested in designing and repairing string instruments might work with an artisan who agrees to be the tutor. An agreement must be reached whereby the learning activities, the number of contact hours, the expected outcomes and the evaluative criteria are

detailed by the student, the artisan and the faculty member before the student undertakes the work.

There may be some students who need interaction with other students. This interaction may be accomplished by writing a learning contract in which the student enrolls in a formal course (or courses) at another institution. On the other hand, a collective contract might be designed with one or more faculty member participating. Each student could pursue an individual part of the contract but would share in the breadth and depth of the entire undertaking.

Another method of fostering this type of interaction is a cooperative study which is explored by a group of students who have a common interest. A cooperative study may evolve into a residency program.

Some students may wish to plan short-term residential contracts during which they meet for an occasional long weekend or week sharing experiences, products, and insights, or sharpening skills or concepts. Opportunities to participate in workshops and colloquia with visiting and residential scholars can be scheduled. The particular facilities used for such residencies need not be elaborate; a temporarily vacated college dormitory would do as would an old house in the country, or an off-season motel.

A residential program in the arts was sponsored by Empire State College. It took place at the Skidmore College campus in Saratoga Springs so that participants could also attend the performances and cultural events at the Saratoga Performing Arts Center. The residency was about eight days. The facilities, although inexpensive, were not the significant factor; the important objective was to bring together people with like interests so they might create for themselves while they were there.

Travel, a broadening element of education, might be a specific purpose of a contract; not the travel <u>per se</u>, but the actual programs and activities

undertaken during the travel. Such activities could include living with a family in a foreign country and visiting historical sites or attending cultural events, studying trade unions, or participating in archaeological digs.

One student was involved in a study of nursery school programs. Two weeks into the contract she called to inform the faculty member that she planned to accompany her husband to England on a business trip for ten days. Rather than withdraw from her studies or prolong the time element of the learning contract, the faculty member suggested an amendment to the learning contract which would incorporate the trip. While in England she visited several nursery schools to observe; she also interviewed the parents of children in these schools. This was invaluable first hand experience of seeing what she was reading about. In a later learning contract she interviewed parents of children in nursery schools in this country and then did a comparative study with the information she had obtained while in England.

Of course, not to be overlooked is a contract where a faculty member works directly with a student who is pursuing a particular competence or undertaking independent research.

Any combination of topics may be written into a single contract. For example, a student enrolled in a recreational leadership course might simultaneously have a field experience as a volunteer worker in the child's ward of a local hospital, thus combining theory with practical experience. Infinite ways of combining activities depend on the time involved, the resources available and the needs of the student.

Some questions the student and faculty member might want to keep in mind when stating the purpose(s) of the contract are:

- What will be the end result of this contract? Will it be a behavior, a product, or a process?
- Will the outcome relate to the terms of the student's long-range plans?

- Is the student equipped to achieve the stated goals within the time limits of the contract?
- Are there opportunities for the student to pursue these goals?
- Will an informed observer such as a work supervisor, a tutor, a field worker, or a consultant be able to aid the student to achieve the expected outcomes?

The third part of a contract, the learning activity must be specific. If particular books are to be read, they should be listed. If a student is going to develop a bibliography, this should be indicated. For example, a student may submit a bibliography to a faculty member for approval or for suggestions for modification. In this way the student has an opportunity to become familiar with the literature which is available in the field. Then the student may read two or three books of his choice - or the faculty member may indicate the titles of those which must be read.

If a student is to choose from several alternatives, these should be mentioned. For example, a learning contract can indicate that the student has a choice of doing a case study or an in-depth research of a specific aspect of an area of interest. Either project is acceptable, but both should be mentioned as alternatives.

If individuals are to be interviewed, the names of the interviewees, their offices or responsibilities should be indicated as well as the purposes of the interviews.

When field trips or volunteer activities are anticipated, elements of when, where, with whom and for what end should be mentioned.

Meetings of students with faculty members or their tutors should be scheduled with particular times and purposes, even if the purpose is only to create check points for progress reports. Dates for submission of papers or examinations should be included.

A log is a useful tool whereby a student can record activities pertinent to his or her learning. Again, the log should be specific, naming individuals

contacted, recording bibliography, mentioning events attended, facilities visited or field work accomplished. An important aspect of the log is the identification of significant ideas encountered. Through a log, a student and a faculty member may examine the value of the activities the student undertakes, their contributions to his/her degree program and their implications for future studies. This constitutes an analysis of the learning, a critique and an application to the student's purposes and plans. A log need not, and indeed, should not be a diary or intimate revelation of personal matters.

If a student is going to enroll in a class at another institution, the title of the course, the catalog number and, if possible, a course description should be included.

The learning activities should indicate enough specificity for the student to proceed and yet sufficient flexibility to permit the student to explore. There should be opportunities for the student to display initiative and creativity; activities should be appropriately demanding for the student's academic status and level of development.

Learning contracts should be explicit about the means and evaluation and the criteria to be applied. Desired outcome must be specified, such as:

- Is the process of learning to be stressed?
- Are special techniques to be mastered?
- What ideas or concepts are anticipated?
- Is the objective of this learning contract concerned with the student's ability to analyze and criticize a concept or to synthesize it and indicate its application to a relevant situation?

That which is to be evaluation should be clearly described, whether it be a paper, a log, a journal, work samples, an oral presentation, an artistic performance, or a test result.

Each institution has its own method of recording evaluations. At Empire State College, a digest and evaluation of a learning contract includes a restatement of the objectives of the learning contract, the learning activities, the criteria which were established for the evaluation and the actual evaluation. This may be a grade which appears on the transcript of another institution where the student enrolled in a course. More often, it is a description of the techniques a student mastered or an application of a concept to a pertinent situation. Usually the student's growth and strengths are identified as well as those areas which need improvements.

Early learning contracts may be of a short duration while a student learns how to work independently in a relatively new mode. They may be exploratory providing the student and faculty member the opportunity to assess the student's ability and level of academic competence. Short learning contracts can help a student clarify his/her interests and purposes and help to discover strengths and weaknesses.

The duration of a learning contract should be indicated with a beginning date and an ending date. It might be helpful to equate the learning activities of a one month contract with a three or four hour course at a traditional institution. It is conceivable that a student may want to explore alternative resources or to prepare a bibliography which is to be included in a learning contract. In such a case, the actual writing of a learning contract might be dealyed. When it is written, it might be backdated to include the student's work.

Contracts should clearly indicate the responsibilities of the faculty member or tutor as well as those of the student. At Empire State College after a contract has been signed by the student and the faculty member, it is signed by the Associate Dean of the learning center and then reviewed by the Office of the Vice-President for Academic Affairs.

While the assumption is that careful planning precludes major changes in the execution of the contract, a student, in consultation with the faculty member, should be able to modify a contract for sufficient reasons. Therefore, provisions for amending a contract should be available.

The following are some problems which have been identified in connection with the writing of learning contracts.

- Inability of some students to work independently, i.e. via the learning contract mode,
- Lack of available or competent tutors,
- Lack of tutorial financial assistance,
- Inability of faculty members to make interinstitutional cooperative arrangements whereby a student may enroll in a course at another institution without having to pay double tuition,
- Too many students for one faculty member to serve,
- Inability of some students to seek or research community resources for materials and/or facilities, and
- Inflexibility or lack of creativity on the part of some faculty members to help in the development of a learning contract which meets the needs of particular students.